

The Common Hamster in Flanders' Fields: status and protection

Der Feldhamster in Flandern: Status und Schutz

SASKIA MERCELIS

Kurzfassung: Der Feldhamster gehört zu den stark gefährdeten Arten in Flandern (Belgien). Aktuelle Untersuchungen haben das Vorkommen von nur vier bedeutsamen Populationen aufgezeigt. 2001 wurde ein Schutzprogramm entwickelt, um die verbliebenen Populationen zu schützen. Das Programm unterstützt den Schutz des Hamsters in seinem ursprünglichen Lebensraum, einer abwechslungsreichen Agrarlandschaften von hohem ökologischen Wert. Die vorgeschlagenen Schutzaktionen sind auf unterschiedliche Zielgruppen abgestimmt und sind räumlich differenziert ausgelegt.

It has been known for several years that the Common Hamster, once abundant, has become highly endangered in Flanders (Belgium), but detailed surveys were lacking. In 1998, Natuurpunt (a Flemish nature organisation) started an intensive survey on this highly endangered species, supported by Aminal (the Flemish administration for environment and infrastructure) and Brakona and Likona (two provincial nature study organisations).

Detailed inventories from 1998 till 2001 revealed that four major, though small populations were remaining (see figure 1). This clearly demonstrated the importance of special conservation measures, hence a species conservation plan was developed in 2001 (VALCK et al. 2001).

The conservation plan promotes „in situ“ protection, i. e. protection of the hamster in its original West-European habitat. The hamster is considered as an indicator

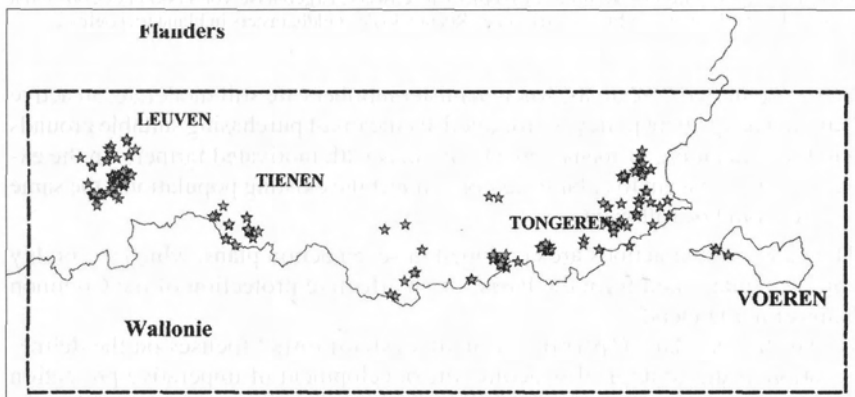


Figure 1: Hamster burrows (grey stars) detected during an intensive 4-year study (1998–2001) in Flanders (Belgium)

Abbildung 1: Hamsterbauten (graue Sterne) in Flandern – Ergebnisse einer intensiven, vierjährigen (1998–2001) Untersuchung.

species for diverse and ecologically rich agricultural landscapes. In situ hamster protection can therefore have an important „trigger-down-effect“, as it implies protection of the undervalued agro-ecosystem.

The proposed conservation actions are adapted to the different target groups, i. e. farmers, hunters and naturalists, administrations (from the local to the national level), and the broad public. Each target group should be involved maximally in order to increase the social support of and the co-operation with the project.

Three area types are delimited, in which different action packets are proposed. In the hamster area, i. e. the potential distribution area (see figure 2, global habitat value for the hamster $>25\%$ (ONKELINX 2001)), the stress is on sensitisation and promotion of environmental friendly agriculture.

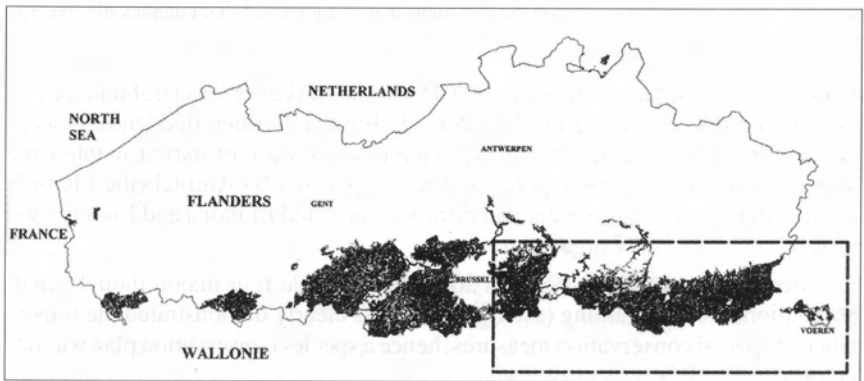


Figure 2: Potential distribution area (in black; study results by ONKELINX, 2001) and historical distribution area (rectangle) of the hamster in Flanders (Be)

Abbildung 2: Potentielles Verbreitungsgebiet (in schwarz, Ergebnisse von ONKELINX 2001) und historisches Verbreitungsgebiet (gestricheltes Rechteck) des Feldhamsters in Flandern (Belgien)

In four delimited core areas, where hamster numbers are still moderate, an active habitat management policy is promoted, by means of purchasing suitable grounds and the concluding of management contracts with motivated farmers. In the extension areas, meant to enlarge and/or connect the existing populations, the same policy should be followed.

The conservation actions are combined in seven action plans, which are highly complementary and form the basis for an effective protection of the Common hamster in Flanders.

1. The action plan „Optimisation of instruments“ focuses on the delineation of the ecological structure, the development of imperative protection measures, adaptation of existing management contracts, adaptation of the subsidising system of nature reserves
2. The action plan „Promotion of ecological friendly agriculture“ has to contribute to the improvement of the global ecological quality of the coun-

tryside. Stimulation of ecological friendly agricultural methods can be done by using management contracts and promotion of the codex of good agricultural principles.

3. The action plan „Management of core-areas“ implies measures meant to protect the remaining wild populations. The currently available protection measures imply management contracts, maintenance and management of the ecological infrastructure, defragmentation measures and measures for wildlife protection.
4. The action plan „Design of suitable biotopes“ discusses the design of (new) biotopes for the Hamster. This is, on a long-term basis, the best guaranty for the survival of the species. The existing activities like land use development, nature development and reallocation, taking place within the hamster area, will be evaluated and possibilities for integration of the planned design and management activities within the hamster protection program will be checked. The action plan „Monitoring and evaluation“ stresses the importance of monitoring of the hamster population, in order to allow the evaluation of the effectiveness of the undertaken protection actions.
5. The action plan „Applied research“ discusses the necessary research items: spatial ecology of the hamster, hamster friendly agricultural practices, population genetics, minimum viable population, viability of the subpopulations, inventory and feasibility study for reintroduction.
6. The action plan „Information and sensitisation“ aims to enlarge the social basis of hamster protection. Furthermore, it is the intention to maximise the involvement and co-operation with the project. This is realised through sensitisation, education and consultation.

Realisation of the action plan is the task of the Flemish and provincial authorities. Though the first small-scale conservation actions have already taken place, more funding is necessary in order to realise an effective protection of the hamster in Flanders' fields.

Literature

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SASKIA MERCELIS
Natuurpunt (formerly: De Wielewaal VZW)
Kardinaal Mercierplein 1
2800 Mechelen,
Belgium
E-Mail: saskia.mercelis@natuurpunt.be

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